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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2009 words.

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On technology as an evolving medium

Filmmaker and immersive media artist Aaron Bradbury discusses the path that led him from being a painter to working in virtual reality, and what makes technology a complicated medium.

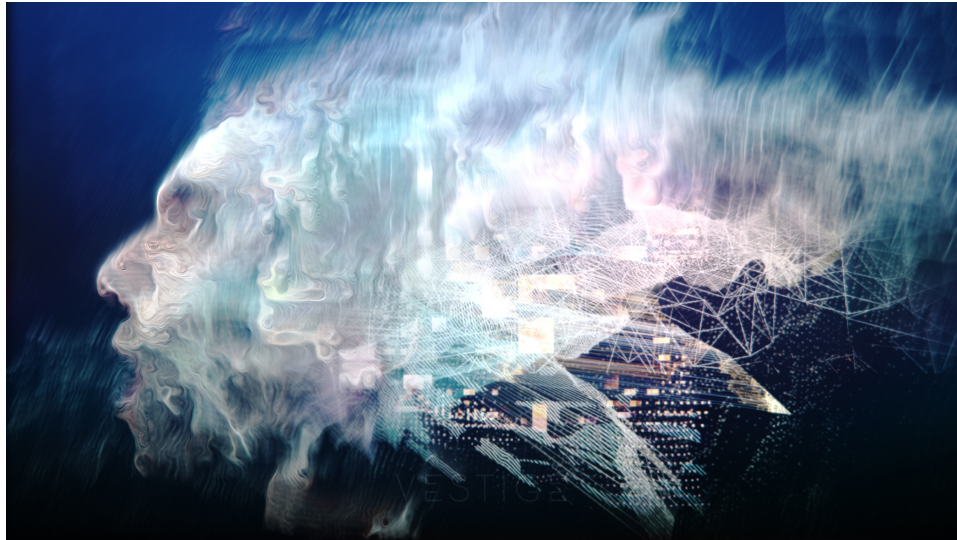
What led you to do this kind of work? Were you working in technology or were you a narrative filmmaker before?

I'm originally from a painting background, but I eventually moved to interactive work. I was working for an animator who died and I went to a conference that was a celebration of his life and all of his work. A couple of guys from the National Space Center in the UK were there, and they'd seen some of the short films I'd done with him. They invited me to come see the kind of stuff they were doing, which was inside a digital planetarium where they use multiple projectors to create images all over the surface of the dome. The experience blew my mind. I remember watching a film there called *Astronaut*, and it was like I was floating in space. It felt immersive to the point where I was holding onto my seat thinking we were actually moving.

Immediately I was like, "I need to get a job here." That was in 2007. Since then I've been working on numerous full-dome projects throughout the world, corporate stuff as well as planetariums and educational content. That branched out into the interactive media-immersive work for theme parks. I do things like creating queue-line immersive experiences so that as soon as you queue up for an experience or a ride, you're experiencing loads of media while you wait, and building narratives as well so people feel like they're becoming part of the story before they get onto the ride itself.

As for my personal work, I've been working in full dome and trying to figure out how to make an engaging narrative in that space. It can be tricky. Because of the immersive nature of the experience, it can be quite easy to lose yourself in that space, so you're looking around and trying to figure out what's going on half the time, which means you can easily lose the thread of the narrative and the story.

I also started doing experimental and interactive work, pieces set with music, and building installations where you can interact with large screens. All of that led to me creating my first VR piece, *LoVR*. My interest and experience with all of these emerging formats kind of merged together. Doing stuff for a dome is different than doing stuff in VR, as there's a whole load of extra variables involved, but overall there are some similar principles at work.



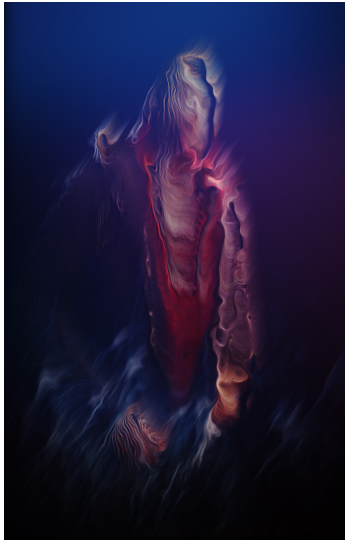
still from *Vestige*

VR has exploded in popularity over the past couple of years, but it feels like people still haven't figured out how to make it work in a narrative context. In a fine-arts setting, or in gaming, it makes sense, but using it to tell a feature-length story is still a work in progress.

There's a lot of stuff out there, but it's hard to find the more successful narrative pieces. There are different platforms popping up that will host a highly curated list of VR films that are trying to tell stories, but it is something people are obviously still trying to figure out. It's definitely happening, but right now it's like people are just throwing all kinds of experiments out there and seeing what happens. I find that there's not always time to do your own experimentation; you just have to run with it to try and keep pace with the technology. For me, every piece is essentially an experiment building on the previous one.

How do you balance making commercial work with your own creative work?

With my job at the National Space Center I'm making immersive content all the time. Other jobs come along and I take them whenever I can. With my personal work, I try to make at least one new thing every year and release it, whether that be a short film or an installation or a VR piece. In 2016 I started working on *Vestige*, which was different because I got development funding to work on it. The company I work for decided to take it on as one of our projects and figure out if we could make it work, even though we normally work in an educational setting. So it's a little bit out of our comfort zone in terms of business for the company, but we've been figuring that out along the way, bringing onboard other producers or trying to source other arts funding.



still from *Vestige*

If you're making personal work in VR—or in some format that is not a flat film—part of the challenge must be finding places that can show it in the right context, or finding spaces where people can experience it in the right way. Is that difficult?

Yes and no. It's not so much a problem of the equipment—most people are using the same VR equipment to show things—it's more to do with the experience. At a festival setting, for example, people aren't seeing the same thing at the same time, so it's harder to talk about the experiences together. With the dome pieces it's complicated in other ways, since you usually have to create different versions to work in various settings. In China, for example, they have 8K resolution, but other domes don't always have that, so you have to create multiple version outputs for all of these different places that could see it.

Can you imagine at some point there might be something like Netflix for VR, where you have the equipment in your house and then you can just choose which films you want to experience? Is that one imagined future for this kind of work?

I think so. There are a lot of people who are like, "Yeah, this is going to be a thing. Everyone will have this!" But from my own experience, certain things suggest that it might not work that well. It's kind of like 3D televisions. It seems like a natural progression to go from a normal flat-screen TV to having 3D TVs, but they don't sell them anymore because nobody really bought them. That was a brief little moment. VR is sort of similar. I personally watch a lot of VR stuff because that's what I do, but I don't go home at night and watch VR with my wife. It's still a very insular experience. At home we watch Netflix, just like everyone else. Even if we had two VR headsets, trying to share that experience would still feel a little weird to me.

That feels like a future in which we really are all totally disconnecting from the world, and each other...

Yeah, it's definitely possible—that eventually in VR you could share the experience with another person and you'd see their avatar in the experience you were sharing. It could even be very realistic, but I don't know how that would actually feel, you know?

Has the technology to make this kind of work become more accessible? What are the resources you need in order to do it?

So, the tools are brilliant, first of all. You can make something pretty quickly, it just depends what level of thing you want to make. It depends on how much knowledge you might have to acquire before you can get towards that goal, and how ambitious you want to be. If it's just some punk, DIY filmmaking kind of thing, a 360 camera for a hundred dollars would suffice.

It's pretty quick and easy to grab something, make a video, and then edit together footage. You can use free editing tools for this. And even if you want to make realtime stuff, there are packages where you can download them, use them for free, and figure it all out to make something. It's only when you start selling it when you need to pay for some of those softwares. They make it very open and accessible so that people can learn it and figure it out... and then you have to buy it.



still from *Vestige*

For people who want to explore trying to do this kind of work, where should they begin? Do you just take yourself to YouTube University?

It doesn't take long to Google some of this stuff and figure out what's out there and what's been done, and how to make some of it. For artists that want to do something gestural and painterly inside this world—which is sort of in keeping with what I do—there's a free tool called Quill. It was created as a production tool by a studio to make a film called *Dear Angelica*, and then they released it so other people could easily create three-dimensional paint scenes and scenarios and have them animate. Using it, you can make something that's like a comic book VR world. People have used it to create things that are quite realistic as well. You can do some pretty cool stuff. I think someone that's used to painting and image-making can quickly get the hang of drawing inside a VR hood and holding the controllers and using them like a paintbrush.

What are the downsides to working in this medium? I assume a lot of the technology can become obsolete pretty quickly. Also, no matter what the medium is or what cutting-edge tech is involved, unless the work is in service of good ideas, it kind of doesn't matter.

Absolutely. If you are making creative work about technology, it's going to always exist as this snapshot in time because technology is always going to move forward. Whether it remains interesting or not totally depends on your subject matter. One of the pieces I've been showing recently is this very personal VR piece about death, so one hopes people in the future will still be able to relate to that. Still, depending on how it's being presented, it might not make sense anymore. It's interesting to think about. Maybe it will be like finding a floppy disk and realizing that you no longer have the technology required to view it.

A hundred years from now someone might say, "Oh, isn't this poignant, someone made this thing about death and this is the way people looked at it. How crazy!"

Exactly. And by that time death will no longer be a thing to worry about, and no one will even remember what it was like to have emotions. Progress!



still from *Vestige*

Aaron Bradbury recommends:

Sleep No More - So many freeze-frame memories, but there's one that resonates: a crowded room pulsing with rave music and strobing images of blood and naked bodies. A multi-narrative metropolis. □

Here - Richard McGuire - My wife got me this as a Christmas present. I remember waking her up after reading it on Christmas night... "I kind of feel like life doesn't mean anything anymore." Maybe not in such a nihilist sense. I see the beauty in the cycle of life, but I still get little existential twitches now and again since reading it. Memory, place, time... repeated. □

"Crashing Spheres" - Starkey - The original inspiration behind *Vestige*. I always see stories in music and this track always brings me close to tears.

Dear Esther - Story and place. An island of memories. □

Memory and Forgetting - Radiolab - Most of my work has a strong thread of science that runs alongside the art. Radiolab always marries these two together. There are so many great episodes but this one relates to *Vestige* the most and it has the incredible Oliver Sacks and a heartbreaking story of how love and music can transcend memory loss.

Name

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Vocation

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Fact



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